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INVESTIGATIONS AND SYSTEMS TESTS IN THE LAKE CHAMPLAIN BASIN, 1986

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INTRODUCTION

In July, 1986, Wind & Whalebone Media Productions continued its field investigation into the supposed large, unknown animals in Lake Champlain, said to be "Loch Ness-like animals," and popularly referred to as "Champ." This year's research was a continuation of previous seasons' fieldwork (see Richard D. Smith, 1985, Investigations in the Lake Champlain Basin, 1985, *Cryptozoology,* Vol. 4: 74–79). The research methodology continued to be guided by considerations of the reported animals' three-dimensional, "drowned valley" habitat, and their possible position in the food chains or webs of the lake's ecosystem.

The intent of the 1986 work was: (1) to test a new underwater video system and a new chart-recording sonar device, both deployed from a boat; (2) to obtain records of bottom contours and aquatic life; (3) to test the effect of "chumming" (fish feeding) on attracting aquatic life within recording distance; (4) to cross-reference sonar and video work with bathymetric and standard navigational charts via boat position sightings; (5) to gather any data of use to professional scientists; and (6) to relay any information on previously unrecorded sightings of Champ to the Lake Champlain Phenomena Investigation (LCPI).

Our 1986 fieldwork consisted of 21 days on-site, July 6 through July 26. Ten days were spent in data-gathering operations, with the remaining period spent on equipment preparation, data analysis, and miscellaneous down time, including several work sessions canceled by bad weather and last minute changes in boat scheduling.

Exercises were coordinated by the author. Assisting him in operations were Gary S. Mangiacopra, Phil Keller, Kip Cooper, Phil Houston, and Wendy Lathrop. David Olsen, Ike Blonder, Tom Walko, Gil Fell, and Bill James provided assistance during preparations for this season's work.

Ike and Lois Blonder visited our base July 19 through July 21. Although unable to participate in field operations, due to bad weather and scheduling conflicts, Ike Blonder reviewed our sonar and video work to date. A physicist and electrical engineer, and veteran of the Academy of Applied Science's Loch Ness research, Blonder's comments were most helpful. LCPI director Joseph Zarzynski visited our base on July 25. As leader of research into "Champ," his interest and suggestions were particularly welcome. Ac-

knowledgment is made of the support of Robert Durant and Margaret Light of this season's work.

Narrative Description

The underwater video system, designed and built by David Olsen, used a GBC black and white camera in a watertight casing. The primary sonar unit was a Vexilar K-1200 chart recorder. The Raytheon/Apelco MR-201C chart recorder used in 1985 was used in separate operations for comparison with the Vexilar machine.

Primary equipment tests were conducted in deep water near Essex, New York. Additional runs using sonar only were conducted north to Willsboro Point and Four Brothers Island, south to Westport, and in Whallon Bay. An additional camera-only test was made in the Essex anchorage area.

The camera was deployed at varying depths where sonar tracings indicated the presence of large fish, and also the maximum available cable outlay (95 feet) to test the system's performance under increasing water pressure and greatly decreasing light. All camera trials were recorded aboard boat on a portable video recorder, and observed on a monitor screen. A sensor built into the camera casing provided water temperature readings at the surface.

As in previous seasons, shore watching for Champ was not emphasized, but still and motion picture cameras were carried by expedition members when on or near the lake in the event of a surface sighting. With the exception of one late-afternoon through early-evening session of camera tests in the Essex anchorage, scheduled dawn, dusk, and evening work was not possible due to unseasonably stormy weather and the last-minute unavailability of promised boats.

The names and addresses of eight persons with eyewitness accounts of what was thought to be Champ, previously unrecorded by LCPI, were relayed to Joseph Zarzynski for follow-up. Five involved sightings claimed for the 1986 season, three for previous years. The author interviewed at length Al Trost, owner of Trost's Bait & Tackle Shop, in Essex, and a driving education instructor for the township high school. Private inquiries revealed Trost to be a well-respected member of the community.

Trost reported seeing an elongated, pole-like object which was off-shore north of Essex, and moving north, on July 7, sometime between 6 and 7 p.m. At that time, the author was approximately one mile south of Trost's position, testing equipment in the Essex anchorage. No object was observed by the author, or reported by the several fisherman lining the shore. If this was indeed a real Champ event, the animal must have surfaced north of the Essex-to-Charlotte, Vermont, ferry run, and then come into Trost's field of view.

Although not classifying the object as a Champ animal, Trost said he had

observed it for a long time, perhaps as long as a half hour, and that it changed direction and speed twice while moving away from a motor boat (whose operator did not slow down, and probably did not see it). Trost said he could make out water breaking over what appeared to be the back of the object, but saw no hump as such. It finally became lost to view up the coast. Unfortunately, by the time the author was able to meet with Trost, weather conditions and boat availability did not allow a comparative sonar and positioning run over the object's course, as was carried out with the McGeoch/Temple sighting last year (see Smith, 1985, above).

The author conferred on July 24 with George LaBar, of the Wildlife and Fisheries Biology Program, University of Vermont, Burlington. Although LaBar expressed strong reservations about the existence of Champ animals, he examined some of the expedition's sonar records, and gave his opinions as to what forms of aquatic life may have been recorded during field operations.

Results

No video, photographic, or sonar recordings of any objects thought to be of Champ were made this season, nor were there any unexplained visual observations made by expedition members.

The new equipment functioned well. Numerous sonar recordings were made of lake basin contours, and of fish in deep water. The author's opinion, supported by George LaBar's examination of our sonar charts, is that lake trout (*Salvelinus*) and cisco or lake whitefish (*Coregonus*) were consistently recorded in the central basin swimming at depths of 72 to 108 feet (12 to 18 fathoms). LaBar also suggested that cloud-like clusters consistently recorded at approximately 120 feet depths near shore contours, and within 6 feet below the surface, were, respectively, aggregations of adult and juvenile smelt (*Osmerus*).

A bottom target was recorded which might represent a boat wreck. Information on the target is being sent to Champlain maritime history experts, at Joseph Zarzynski's suggestion, in the event it was indeed a wreck, and of historical interest.

Underwater video footage was obtained in the Essex anchorage of small fish—yellow perch (*Perca*), and some unidentified minnow-like fish. Only one indistinct video record of a fish was obtained in deep water, despite sonar indications that the camera had been lowered in the vicinity of a number of large fish. There are several likely reasons for this. Although two small lights on the camera functioned throughout field operations, a larger and more powerful light collapsed from water pressures at about 75 feet, severely restricting the camera's ability to "see" at such depths. Lake trout and other large fish found in deep freshwater lakes do not form true schools,

but typically form loose aggregations near food sources and in agreeable temperatures. Thus, the probability that individuals would pass within recording range of the camera (limited to a few feet with reduced lighting) was small compared to the probability of their passing through the sonar beam (the Vexilar unit recorded a continuous vertical range from surface to bottom anywhere in the lake). Finally, no deep water operations were carried out during dawn and dusk, periods of peak fish activity; it was understandably difficult to find boat owners willing to take us out on the lake for long periods at "odd" hours, and full-price boat charters were prohibitively expensive.

Sonar records indicated that we were successful in attracting fish by "chumming." Assuming that the large, unknown animals reported in deep freshwater lakes are at or near the top of the lakes' food chains, and therefore piscivorous, to consistently attract fish within recording range could greatly increase the chances of also recording these presumed fish predators. This strategy could provide a benign and relatively efficient method for identifying and studying such animals. However, we must improve our capabilities for deep water video recording, and significantly increase time spent on the lake before our approach can prove reliable.

Future Plans

The author and his associates will return to Lake Champlain in 1987. Research will proceed along the lines discussed above. Purchase of our own research vessel is planned, and it is hoped that operators of increasingly sophisticated sonar equipment will join our field work. Liaison will be maintained with LCPI and with professional scientists.